

# 1

## The Origins of the French Revolution

### POINTS TO CONSIDER

The French Revolution was one of the most dramatic events in modern European History and also one of the most complex. The date frequently associated with the Revolution is 14 July 1789 when a notorious prison, the Bastille, was stormed in Paris. This date and event came to symbolise the downfall of the old order and the forced acceptance by the French monarchy of limited democracy. From that point onwards the pace of change increased and the French people and their institutions were subjected to enormous upheavals resulting in war, civil war, persecution, execution, dictatorship and economic chaos. The origin of the Revolution was due to a combination of political, economic and social factors. This chapter examines these factors as two main themes:

- Long-term causes of the French Revolution
- Short-term causes of the French Revolution

### Key dates

1614	Last summoning of the Estates-General before 1789
1756–63	The Seven Years War
1774	Accession of Louis XVI
1778	France entered the American War of Independence
1781–7	Economic crisis
1788	Declaration of bankruptcy

### Key term

#### *Ancien régime*

An expression that was commonly used during the 1790s to describe the French system of government, laws and institutions before the Revolution of 1789.

### 1 | Long-term Causes of the French Revolution

During the *ancien régime* there were a number of deep-rooted problems that affected successive royal governments. These problems influenced:

- the way France was governed, particularly the taxation system
- the carefully ordered yet deeply divided structure of French society
- the gradual spread of ideas which started to challenge this structure.

## 2 | France in Revolution

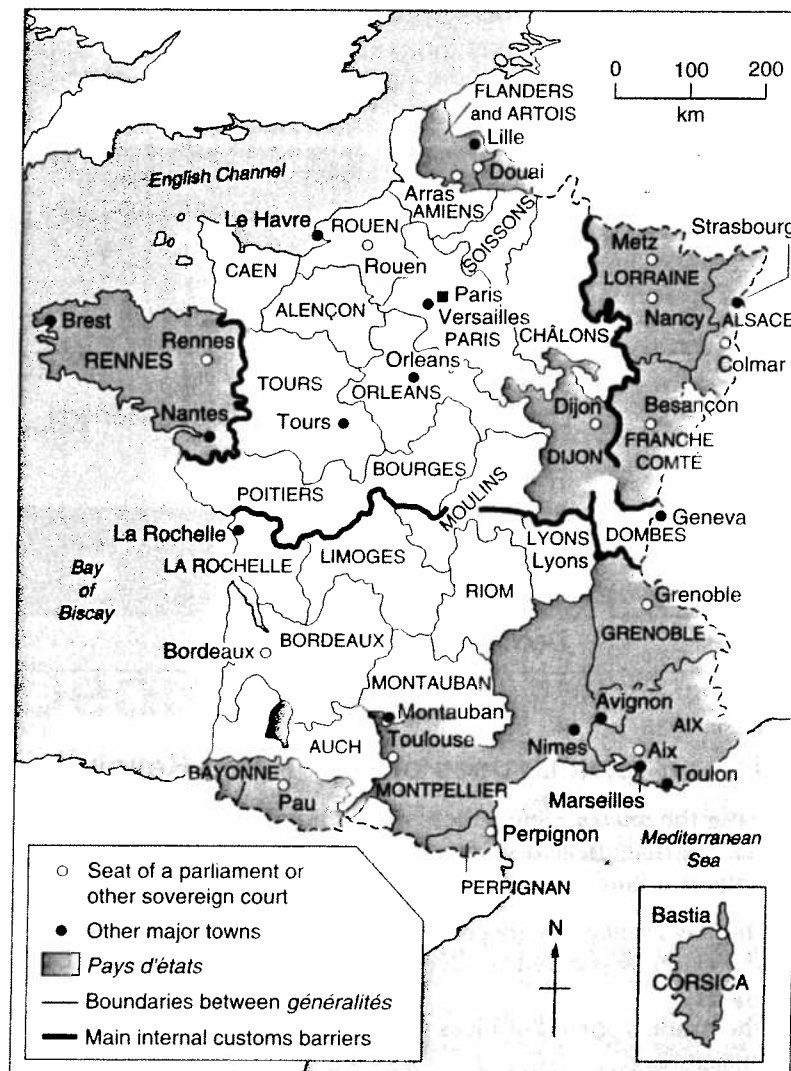
These deep-rooted problems can be seen as long-term causes of the French Revolution and in order to understand them fully it is necessary to understand the nature of French society before 1789, namely:

- (a) the structure of royal government
- (b) the taxation system
- (c) the structure of French society
- (d) the Enlightenment.

### (a) Royal government

France before 1789 was an absolute monarchy ruled by the Bourbons. This meant that the authority of the French Crown was not limited by any representative body, such as an elected parliament. The King was responsible only to God and answerable to no one on Earth. This system of government is also known as absolutism. In such a system the personality and

**Key question**  
What was the nature of royal power?



**Figure 1.1:**  
Pre-revolutionary  
France's main  
administrative, judicial  
and financial  
sub-divisions

## Key terms

**Intendants**

Officials appointed by and answerable to the Crown. They were responsible for police, justice and finance. They were also responsible for public works, communications, commerce and industry.

**Généralités**

34 areas into which France was divided for the purpose of collecting taxes and other administrative functions, and under the control of an *intendant*.

## Key date

Accession of Louis XVI: 1774

## Key question

Why was the unfairness of the taxation system an issue?

character of the ruler is very important as it sets the tone for the style of government.

In the century before the outbreak of the Revolution there were only three French Kings – Louis XIV, Louis XV and Louis XVI. Louis XV said in 1766 that 'sovereign power resides in my person alone ... the power of legislation belongs to me alone'.

**Limitations to power**

However, although their power was absolute, Kings were bound by the laws and customs of the kingdom. For example, there were many independent bodies such as the Assembly of the Clergy which had rights and privileges guaranteed by law. The King could not interfere with these.

The King also had to consult his council of ministers and advisers to make laws. This meant considerable power was in the hands of a small number of men. The most important of these was the Controller-General, who was in charge of royal finances. Each minister dealt with the King on an individual basis and did not form part of a cabinet system of government.

In the provinces the King's government was carried out by the *intendants* who had far-reaching powers in the *généralités*. In 1774 Louis XVI, the grandson of Louis XV, acceded to the French throne. The new King was well intentioned but never came to terms with the State's financial problems. In an absolutist system the monarch needed to be a strong figure with a dominant personality. Louis, although well intentioned, was rather weak and indecisive.

**(b) The taxation system**

Good government benefits greatly from an efficient taxation system that provides it with an adequate income. The taxation system in France was both chaotic and inefficient (see Table 1.1).

**Table 1.1:** The main taxes imposed during the *ancien régime*

Tax	Description	Indirect/ direct	Who was taxed?
<i>Taille</i>	Land tax	Direct	Third Estate
<i>Vingtième</i>	Five per cent tax on income	Direct	Third Estate
Capitation	Tax on people – poll tax	Direct	In theory Second and Third Estates
<i>Gabelle</i>	Salt tax	Indirect	Everyone
<i>Aidas</i>	Tax on food and drink	Indirect	Everyone
<i>Octrois</i>	Tax on goods entering a town	Indirect	Everyone

**Direct taxes**

The main direct tax before the Revolution was the *taille*. In theory this was payable by anyone who did not belong to one or other of the two privileged estates – the Church and the nobility (see pages 6–9). In reality, the inhabitants of some towns had been granted exemption by the Crown so the burden fell mainly on the peasantry. There was also the capitation (a tax on people

#### 4 | France in Revolution

frequently called a poll tax) and the *vingtième* (a five per cent levy on all incomes). However, not everyone was taxed equally and this unfairness created resentment. The Church did not pay them at all, and the nobles were exempt from the *taille*.

##### Profile: Louis XVI 1754–93

- 1754 – Born and christened Louis-Auguste, younger son of the dauphin Louis-Ferdinand (son and heir of Louis XV)
- 1765 – Following the death of his elder brother (1761) and the death of his father, Louis-Auguste becomes dauphin
- 1770 – Louis-Auguste marries Marie Antoinette, daughter of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria
- 1774 – Accession of Louis XVI following the death of his grandfather. Appoints Turgot as finance minister
- 1778 – French soldiers join American War of Independence
- 1781 – Publication by Necker of the *compte rendu* suggesting royal finances are in surplus
- 1785 – The Affair of the Diamond Necklace tarnished reputation of the royal family
- 1787 – Notables reject Louis' reform proposals
- 1788 – Louis sends the *Parlement* of Paris into exile causing popular disturbances
  - Agrees calls for summoning of Estates-General
- 1789 – May – Louis opens the Estates-General at Versailles
  - 14 July – Storming of the Bastille – Louis records in his diary the single word '*rien*' – nothing
  - October – Royal family brought forcibly to Paris
- 1791 – 20–21 June – 'flight to Varennes' Louis escapes from Paris
  - September – New Constitution agreed by Louis
  - November – Louis vetoes decrees against the *émigrés* and non-juring priests
- 1792 – 20 April – Declaration of war against Austria
  - 10 August – Storming of the Tuileries – overthrow of the monarchy
  - November – Discovery of the '*armoire de fer*' in the Tuileries
  - December – Trial of Louis
- 1793 – 21 January – Execution of the King



The character of Louis XVI is important in any analysis of the origins of the French Revolution because he was the absolute ruler of France. Previous views that he was unable to cope with the momentous events unfolding around him have recently been revised. While Louis had an excellent memory and took an interest in a range of intellectual subjects, he tended to lack self-confidence and appeared austere. Louis lacked the strength of character to combat the powerful factions in his court and failed at crucial times to give the necessary support to reforming ministers. In 1788 he was forced to summon the Estates-General.

## Key terms

**Tax farming**

A system where the government agrees a tax assessment figure for an area, which is then collected by a company that bids for the right to collect it.

**Venality**

A system whereby certain jobs could be bought and transferred on to descendants.

**Philosophes**

A group of writers and thinkers who formed the core of the French Enlightenment.

**Guild**

An organisation that tightly controls entry into a trade.

**Corvée**

Unpaid labour service to maintain roads, in many places money replaced the service.

**Parlements**

Consisted of 13 high courts of appeal. All edicts handed down by the Crown could not be enforced until registered by the *parlements*.

**Indirect taxes**

There was also a wide range of indirect taxes. These were levied on goods, not incomes. They proved to be a considerable burden to those on low incomes, but brought in a great deal of income to the Crown. Among the indirect taxes were the *gabelle* (a tax on salt), the *aides* (tax on food and drink) and the *octrois* (this taxed goods entering a town).

**Tax collection**

Taxes were collected by a chaotic and inefficient system known as **tax farming**. The Farmers-General was a company that collected the indirect taxes for the government. They paid the State an agreed sum and kept for themselves anything collected above this figure. The French government consequently never received enough money from taxes to cover its expenditure, and so frequently had to borrow. Interest rate payments on the debt became an increasingly large part of government expenditure in the eighteenth century.

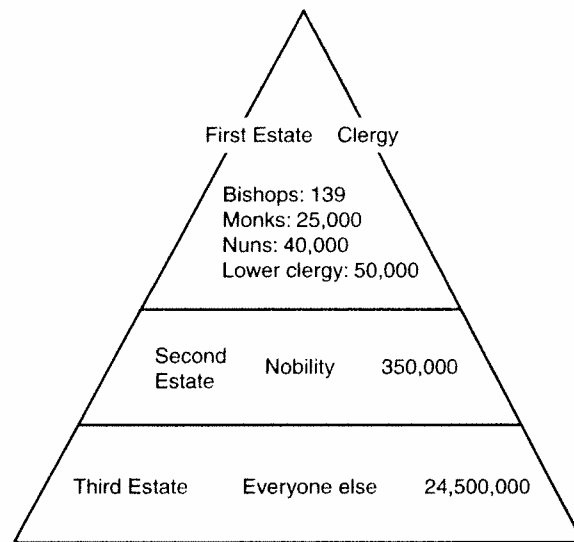
Many of the taxes were collected by officials who, under a system known as **venality**, had bought the right to hold their positions. They could not therefore be dismissed. Corruption and wastage was vast and this resulted in the Crown not receiving an adequate income while the tax-payers knew that much of the taxes they paid never reached the treasury.

On his accession in 1774 Louis XVI was aware of many of the problems affecting the finances of the State. He appointed Turgot as Controller-General. Turgot was influenced by the ideas of the *philosophes* and embarked on a reform programme. His attempts to abolish the trade **guilds** and the *corvée* and to reform the tax system provoked such a storm of protest from the *parlements* and other interested parties that Louis, for the sake of harmony, withdrew his support and Turgot left office.

The bulk of royal revenue was made up of taxation, yet because of the system of exemptions the Crown was denied an adequate income with which to govern the country. In order to meet the demands of war, the Crown was forced to borrow money. The tax collection system – ‘tax farming’ – meant that not all the revenue paid actually reached the treasury. The issue of taxation weakened the Crown and created resentment among the Third Estate. This was one of the most important of the long-term causes of the Revolution.

**(c) French Society during the *ancien régime***

French society in the eighteenth century was divided into three orders known as the Estates of the Realm. The first two estates had many privileges that they frequently used to the disadvantage of the Third Estate. Over the course of the eighteenth century divisions appeared between the estates, and this became a long-term cause of the Revolution.



**Figure 1.2:** The structure of the *ancien régime* c. 1780

### The First Estate

The First Estate was the clergy, which consisted of members of religious orders (monks and nuns) and clergy (parish priests). A number of issues contributed to the Church being unpopular with many people. These were:

- plurality and absenteeism
- tithes
- its exemption from taxes
- its power over the people.

#### *Plurality and absenteeism*

Many younger sons of noble families entered the Church and occupied its higher posts, such as bishops and archbishops, which provided large incomes. The Archbishop of Strasbourg received 400,000 *livres* per annum, which contrasted sharply with most parish priests (*curés*) who only received between 700 and 1000 *livres* each year. Some bishops held more than one bishopric, which meant they were bishops of more than one **diocese**. This is called **plurality**. Many never visited their diocese, i.e. absenteeism. This made the Church very unpopular with many ordinary people who considered that bishops were more interested in wealth than the religious and spiritual needs of the people.

#### *Tithes*

The wealth of the Church came from the land it owned and the tithes paid to it. It was the largest single landowner in France, owning about 10 per cent of the land.

The tithe was a charge paid to the Church each year by landowners and was based on a proportion of the crops they

**Key question**  
Why was the First Estate unpopular?

#### *Livres*

The currency of France during the *ancien régime*. One *livre* was made up of 20 *sous*.

#### **Diocese**

An area served by a bishop. It is made up of a large number of parishes.

#### **Plurality**

The holding of more than one bishopric or parish by an individual.

### **Cahiers**

Lists of grievances and suggestions for reform drawn up by representatives of each estate and each community and presented to the Estates-General for consideration.

### **Versailles**

The vast and splendid palace built outside Paris by Louis XIV. Within the grounds Marie Antoinette had a small rural village built where she could pretend to be a simple peasant.

produced. This charge varied widely. In Dauphine it amounted to about one-fiftieth of the crops produced, while in Brittany it was a quarter. In most parts of France it was about seven per cent of the crop. The income produced by the tithe provided the Church with 50 million *livres* each year.

Tithes were supposed to provide for parish priests, poor relief and the upkeep of Church buildings, but much of it went instead into the pockets of bishops and abbots. This was greatly resented by both the peasantry and the ordinary clergy and was one of the most common grievances made in their *cahiers* in 1788.

### **Tax exemption**

The Church had many privileges apart from collecting the tithe. By far the most important of these was its exemption from taxation. This added to its unpopularity. Its income from property was immense: around 100 million *livres* per year in the closing years of the *ancien régime*. Instead of paying tax the Church agreed to make an annual payment, which it determined, known as the *don gratuit*. It was under five per cent of the Church's income and was much less than it could afford to pay.

### **Power over the people**

France was a very religious country and Catholicism was the official state religion. The influence of the Church was considerable and touched many areas of people's lives.

It had wide-ranging powers of censorship over books which were critical of the Church, provided poor relief, hospitals and schools, and kept a list in the parish of all births, marriages and deaths. At a time when communication in general was very poor, the Church acted as a sort of Ministry of Information for the government, when parish priests informed their congregations about various policies and initiatives. The vast wealth of the Church and its resistance to new ideas made it unpopular with many people, which contributed to the long-term causes of the Revolution.

### **Key question**

What were the benefits of belonging to the Second Estate?

### **The Second Estate**

Of the three estates, the nobility was the most powerful. Unlike the British nobility, which numbered hundreds, the French nobility numbered hundreds of thousands, although the exact numbers are disputed. Figures for the numbers of nobles by 1789 vary between 110,000 and 350,000. Within the nobility there were great variations in wealth and status.

- The most powerful were the 4000 court nobility, restricted in theory to those whose noble ancestry could be traced back to before 1400; in practice to those who could afford the high cost of living at **Versailles**.
- Second in importance were the *noblesse de robe* – legal and administrative nobles which included the 1200 magistrates of the *parlements*.
- The remainder of the nobility – the overwhelming majority – lived in the country in various states of prosperity. Under the

## 8 | France in Revolution

law of primogeniture, a landed estate was inherited by the eldest son. Younger sons were forced to fend for themselves and many joined the Church, the army or the administration.

The main source of income for the Second Estate was land, and they owned between a third and a quarter of France. Nearly all the main positions in the State were held by nobles – among them government ministers, *intendants* and upper ranks in the army.

### *Privileges*

In addition to holding most of the top jobs in the State, the nobility had many privileges. They:

- were tried in special courts
- were exempt from military service
- were exempt from paying the *gabelle*
- were exempt from the *corvée* (forced labour on the roads)
- received a variety of **feudal** (also known as seigneurial) **dues**
- had exclusive rights to hunting and fishing
- in many areas had the monopoly right (known as banalities) to operate mills, ovens and winepresses.

Perhaps their greatest privilege was exemption from taxation. Until 1695 they did not pay direct taxes at all. In that year the capitation was introduced and, in 1749, the *vingtième*. Even with these they managed to pay less than they could have done. They were generally exempt from the most onerous tax of all – the *taille*.

Provincial nobles were strongly attached to these privileges, which represented a significant part of their income. It was the less wealthy of the nobles who felt that if they were to lose their tax privileges and their seigneurial rights that they would face ruination. They were determined to oppose any changes that threatened their positions and undermined their privileges, as these were all they had to distinguish them from the commoners. The privileges relating to land ownership and tax exemption were resented by many ordinary people who saw the Second Estate as avoiding their share of the tax burdens borne by others. These issues contributed to the causes of the Revolution.

### *Joining the nobility*

There were various ways of becoming a noble besides the obvious one of inheritance. One of the main ways of acquiring noble status was either by direct appointment from the King or by buying certain offices that carried hereditary titles. These were called venal offices and there were 12,000 of these in the service of the Crown. They carried titles that could be bought, sold or inherited like any other property.

While gaining a title conveyed both status and benefits there were also limitations. Nobles were not in theory allowed to take part in industrial or commercial activities or they would suffer derogation (loss of their nobility). In reality many did, as the rule was not rigidly enforced. In Paris in 1749 nearly all the people with an income of over half a million *livres* were nobles. Even in

### **Feudal dues**

Either financial or work obligations imposed on the peasantry by landowners.

Key term

### **Key question**

How could an individual enter the nobility?



industrial centres such as Lyon nobles were the wealthiest group. It has been estimated that during the eighteenth century between 30,000 and 50,000 people became nobles. Although the nobility formed a distinct and separate order it was not inaccessible to men of wealth and social ambition.

### Key question

Why did the Third Estate consider itself to be disadvantaged?

### The Third Estate

In essence the Third Estate consisted of everyone who did not belong to one or other of the two privileged estates. There were enormous extremes of wealth within this estate.

#### *The bourgeoisie*

At the top end were the rich merchants, industrialist and business people. This group of rich commoners, who were not peasants or urban workers, is frequently referred to as the **bourgeoisie**.

Among the wealthiest of the bourgeoisie were the merchants and traders who made vast fortunes out of France's overseas trade. Others included financiers, landowners, members of the liberal professions (doctors and writers), lawyers and civil servants. Many were venal office-holders.

As a group the bourgeoisie were rising not only in wealth but also in numbers. There was a threefold increase in the number of bourgeoisie over the course of the eighteenth century to 2.3 million. Although the bourgeoisie was increasing in importance there was no real conflict between them and the nobility until at least the closing years of the *ancien régime*. They did, however, feel that their power and wealth should in some way be reflected in the political system as they bore such a substantial part of the tax revenue paid to the Crown. This slowly simmering resentment contributed to the long-term causes of the Revolution.

#### *The peasantry*

At the other extreme of the Third Estate from the bourgeoisie were the peasantry. They were by far the most numerous section of French society, comprising about 85 per cent of the population. This group, however, covered enormous variations in wealth and status.

At the top end was a small group of large farmers who owned their land, employed labourers and grew for the market. More numerous were the labourers who existed at, or near, subsistence levels. For much of the eighteenth century they, and the larger farmers, did well as agricultural conditions were favourable, particularly in the 1770s. Half of the peasants were share-croppers who did not own their land but farmed it and gave half of their crops to the landlords instead of rent. About a quarter of the peasants were landless labourers, who owned nothing but their house and garden.

In some parts of France **serfdom** continued to exist. There were a million serfs in the east, mainly in Franche Comté. They were at the bottom of the social structure and their children were unable to inherit even personal property without paying considerable dues to their lord. Poor peasants lived in state of chronic

### Key terms

#### **Bourgeoisie**

Usually translated as middle class. In the eighteenth century it carried a much less precise meaning and applied mainly to those who lived in towns and made a living through their intellectual skills or business practices.

#### **Serfdom**

Part of the feudal system where the inhabitants of the land are the property of the landowner.



A contemporary cartoon showing a peasant crushed by the weight of taxes and dues such as the *taille* and *corvée*, imposed by the privileged First and Second Estates

uncertainty. Bad weather or illness could push them into the ranks of the vagrants, who lived by begging, stealing and occasional employment.

#### *Grievances*

In many ways the peasants bore the burden of taxation and this made them extremely resentful. All peasants had to pay tithe to the Church, feudal dues to their lord and taxes to the State. Nearly all land was subject to feudal dues. These included the *corvée*, *champart* (a due paid in grain or other crops to the landlord which could vary from five to 33 per cent of the harvest) and *lods et ventes* (a payment to the *seigneur* when property changed hands).

A further grievance was that the peasant could be tried in the seigneurial court, where the lord acted as both judge and jury.

Taxes paid to the State included the *taille*, capitation and *gabelle*. All these increased enormously between 1749 and 1783 to pay for the various wars France was involved in. Taxes took between five and 10 per cent of the peasants' income. The heaviest burden on the peasantry was the rent they paid their landlords. This increased markedly during the second half of the eighteenth century as a result of the increase in population, which is estimated to have risen from 22.4 million in 1705 to

27.9 million in 1790. This increased the demand for farms, with the result that landlords could raise rents. The increasing financial burden placed on the peasantry along with growing resentment of the feudal system was an important long-term cause of the Revolution.

## Key terms

**Artisan**

A skilled worker or craftsman.

**Sans-culottes**

Literally those who wear trousers (workers) and not knee-breeches (bourgeoisie) and has implications regarding social class. Used as a label to identify the more extreme urban revolutionaries of 1792–5.

**Urban workers**

The remaining part of the Third Estate was made up of urban workers. Small property owners and **artisans** in Paris were known as **sans-culottes**. The majority of workers in the towns lived in crowded insanitary housing blocks known as tenements. They were unskilled and poor.

On the other hand, skilled craftsmen were organised into guilds. In Paris in 1776, 100,000 workers – a third of the male population – belonged to guilds. The standard of living of wage-earners had slowly fallen in the eighteenth century, as prices had risen on average by 65 per cent between 1726 and 1789, but wages by only 22 per cent. In the years immediately preceding the Revolution the worsening economic situation caused considerable resentment among urban dwellers and contributed to the long-term causes of the Revolution. This helps explain their readiness to become involved in the popular demonstrations that helped bring about the overthrow of the *ancien régime*.

### Summary diagram: Issues affecting French society before 1789

**First Estate – The Church**

- Vast differences in wealth between the upper clergy and ordinary priests
- Resentment against the Church regarding tithes and the *don gratuit*

**Second Estate – The Nobility**

- Resentment against nobility for non-payment of direct taxes
- Feudal rights resented by tenants

**Issues affecting French society**
**Third Estate**

- Bourgeoisie had no political role under absolutism
- Burden of taxation largely borne by Third Estate

**(d) The Enlightenment**

During the course of the eighteenth century there emerged in Europe an intellectual movement of writers and thinkers known as the Enlightenment. The movement questioned and challenged a whole range of views and ideas that, at the time, were widely accepted – particularly relating to religion, nature and absolute monarchy. Their analysis of society was based on reason and rational thought, rather than superstition and tradition.

In France they were known as the *philosophes* and were writers rather than philosophers. The most famous were Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau. They wrote on the problems of the day and attacked the prejudice and superstition they saw around them. Many of them contributed to the most important work of the French Enlightenment, *The Encyclopaedia* (edited by Diderot, the first volume appeared in 1752, the last of 35 in 1780).

**Aims of the *philosophes***

The aim of the *philosophes* was to apply rational analysis to all activities. They were not prepared to accept tradition or revelation, as in the Bible, as a sufficient reason for doing anything. They were much more in favour of liberty – of the press, of speech, of trade, of freedom from arbitrary arrest – than of equality, although they did want equality before the law.

The main objects of their attack were the Church and despotic government. They did not accept the literal interpretation of the Bible and rejected anything that could not be explained by reason – miracles, for example – as superstitious. They condemned the Catholic Church because it was wealthy, corrupt and intolerant, and took up Voltaire's cry of '*Écrasez l'infâme*' ('crush the infamous' – meaning the Church).

The *philosophes*, while clearly critical of many aspects of the *ancien régime*, were not essentially opposed to the regime and they were not therefore revolutionary. Yet they did have an impact on the outbreak of the Revolution. Their ideas attacked all the assumptions on which the *ancien régime* was based. They challenged and helped undermine one of the key pillars of the old order, namely the position of the Church and the role of the King as God's servant. Although not revolutionary themselves their ideas and approaches did influence many who would become revolutionaries.

**Key question**

What role did the Enlightenment play in bringing about the Revolution?

**Summary diagram: Long-term causes of the French Revolution****Long-term causes**

1. Problems of government and finance
2. Tensions in society – the Church, nobility, Third Estate
3. Impact of the Enlightenment

## 2 | Short-term Causes of the French Revolution

In the 10 years before the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789 a number of issues, crises and events contributed to the downfall of the *ancien régime* and should be viewed alongside the long-term causes. The main short-term causes were:

- (a) foreign policy
- (b) the financial crisis
- (c) the economic crisis.

### Key question

How did foreign policy contribute to the outbreak of the Revolution?

Key dates

France's defeat in the Seven Years War was sealed by the humiliating Peace of Paris, which resulted in the loss of significant parts of France's overseas empire. Britain took control of French territory in Canada and India, West Africa and a number of islands in the West Indies: 1763

France entered the American War of Independence: 1778

### (a) Foreign policy

#### The Seven Years War

Since the fifteenth century France had more often than not had a hostile relationship with both Britain and Austria. Britain was viewed as France's only serious colonial rival and Austria was a rival for the dominance of mainland Europe. By the middle of the eighteenth century France and Austria had resolved their differences and were allies when the Seven Years War (1756–63) broke out in 1756. During the course of this war, French forces in India and North America suffered a series of crushing defeats at the hands of the British. Much of France's overseas territory was lost in 1763, although the profitable sugar-producing islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, and some other lesser territories, were retained.

#### The American War of Independence

Following this humiliation at the hands of Britain and her ally Prussia, the French government dreamt of revenge. The opportunity came when Britain became involved in a bitter quarrel with her 13 North American colonies, who rebelled against British rule.

In the resulting American War of Independence (1776–83), France intervened on the side of the rebels, providing both financial and military support, including the Marquis de Lafayette (see profile on page 82). The intervention of France in 1778 was decisive and helped bring about the defeat of British forces and the creation of the United States of America.

Although France was unable to recover most of the territory lost during the Seven Years War, the Treaty of Versailles (1783) did satisfy French honour. Few at the time, however, could foresee what the real cost of the war would turn out to be – revolution in France. The war cost a great deal of money and in the short term worsened the already weak financial situation of the Crown. French soldiers who had fought in the war had been exposed to ideas such as liberty and democracy and many demanded similar rights for the people of France.

### Key question

How significant was the financial crisis in bringing about the collapse of the monarchy?

### (b) The financial crisis

The primary short-term cause of the French Revolution was the financial crisis. By far the most important aspect of this was the huge deficit that the government was building up. On 20 August 1786, Calonne, the Controller-General, told Louis XVI that the

## 14 | France in Revolution

government was on the verge of bankruptcy. Revenue for 1786 would be 475 million *livres*, while expenditure would be 587 million *livres*, making a deficit of 112 million – almost a quarter of the total income. A much more detailed and alarming picture of the situation is provided in the Treasury account of 1788, which has been called the first and last budget of the monarchy (see Table 1.2).

The King is informed by his Controller-General that France is on the verge of bankruptcy:  
20 August 1786

Key date

**Table 1.2:** Royal income and expenditure 1788 (millions of *livres*)

Royal income		Royal expenditure	
		Education and poor relief	(12)
		Court expenses	(36)
		Civil expenditure	145
		Military – Army and Navy	165
		Debt interest	318
Total	503	Total	629

The **deficit** had increased in two years to 126 million *livres* – 20 per cent of total expenditure. It was anticipated that for 1789, receipts would amount to only 325 million *livres* and that the interest payments on the deficit would amount to 62 per cent of the receipts.

**Deficit**  
When expenditure is greater than income it results in a deficit.

Key term

There are two reasons to explain why there was a deficit and a financial crisis in France:

### 1. War

Between 1740 and 1783, France was at war for 20 years, first in the War of Austrian Succession (1740–8), then the Seven Years War (1756–63) and finally the American War of Independence (1778–83). The cost of helping the American colonists defeat the British government was approximately 1066 million *livres*. This was mainly achieved through Necker's efforts in raising loans, rather than imposing any new taxes. While this did not directly lead to revolution, the lack of an elected parliament to guarantee loans, as in Britain, did not give lenders confidence.

### 2. Tax

The Crown was not receiving much of the money collected in taxes (see page 5), and until it recovered control of its finances, no basic reforms could be carried out. The privileged classes, whose income from property had increased, were an untapped source of revenue that the Crown urgently needed to access. There would, however, be powerful resistance to any change in the taxation structure from those with vested interests in retaining the status quo.

### Reform

Following Necker's dismissal in 1781 his successor Joly de Fleury discovered the true nature of France's finances. The Treasury was 160 million *livres* short for 1781 and 295 million *livres* short for 1782. To make good the shortfall Fleury and his successor, Calonne, undid much of Necker's work by resuming the practice

**Key question**  
Why did the reform process fail and with what consequences?

Key date

Financial crisis:  
1781–7

of selling offices (many of which Necker had abolished). They both also borrowed much more heavily than Necker.

In 1786, with loans drying up, Calonne was forced to grasp the nettle and embark upon a reform of the tax system, his plan consisted of an ambitious three-part programme.

- The main proposal was to replace the capitation and the *vingtième* on landed property by a single land tax. It was to be a tax on the land and not on the person, and would therefore affect all landed proprietors – Church, noble and common alike – regardless of whether the lands were used for luxury purposes or crops. There were to be no exemptions, everyone including the nobles, the clergy and the *pays d'états* would pay.
- The second part of the programme was aimed at stimulating the economy to ensure that future tax revenues would increase. In order to try and achieve this Calonne proposed abandoning controls on the grain trade and abolishing internal customs barriers, which prevented the free movement of grain from one part of France to another.
- The final part of the programme was to try to restore national confidence so that new loans for the short term could be raised. By doing this Calonne hoped that the *parlements* would be less likely to oppose the registration of his measures. His plan was to achieve some display of national unity and consensus.

Key terms

#### *Pays d'états*

Areas that had local representative assemblies of the three estates that contributed to the assessment and collection of royal taxes.

#### **Estates-General**

A body that, in 1789, contained 939 representatives of all three estates of the realm – Church, nobility and Third Estate. It was only summoned in times of extreme national crisis, and last met in 1614.

#### *The failure of the reform process*

The obvious body to summon to approve the reforms, that was representative of the nation, was the **Estates-General**, but this was rejected as being too unpredictable. Calonne and Louis XVI opted instead for a handpicked Assembly of Notables. It was anticipated that this would be a pliant body who would willingly agree to rubberstamp the reform package.

The 144 members of the Assembly met in February 1787. It included leading members of the *parlements*, princes, leading nobles and important bishops. On examining the proposals it became clear that they would not collaborate with Calonne and Louis in agreeing the reforms. As representatives of the privileged order they had the most to lose from them.

The Notables were not opposed to all change and agreed that taxation should be extended to all. They claimed that the approval of the nation was needed for Calonne's reforms and urged the summoning of the Estates-General, which had last met in 1614. Realising the strength of opposition to Calonne, Louis dismissed him in April 1787.

#### Key question

What was the significance of the political crisis?

#### **The political crisis 1787–8**

Calonne was replaced by one of the Notables, Loménie de Brienne, Archbishop of Toulouse, while another Notable, Lamoignon, President of the *Parlement* of Paris, became head of the Judiciary. The Assembly of Notables proved to be no more co-operative with Brienne than it had been with Calonne.

Brienne retained Calonne's land tax and introduced a number of new reforms following on from Necker's earlier plans. There



Contemporary French cartoon depicting the Assembly of Notables as birds. President Monkey (Calonne) addresses the Notables and asks them with which sauce they would like to be eaten. Animals were frequently used to depict people as they were considered to be much less intelligent than humans.

was to be an end to venal financial officials, a new central treasury established, laws codified in a printed form accessible to those who needed to consult them, the educational system reformed, religious toleration introduced and the army made more efficient and less expensive.

When Brienne presented his reforms to the *Parlement* of Paris for registration they refused and said that only the Estates-General who represented the whole nation could consent to any new taxes. Louis' reaction was to exile the *Parlement* to Troyes on 15 August.

Louis' action was considered to be high handed and the result was an aristocratic revolt, which proved to be the most violent opposition the government had yet faced. There were riots in some of the provincial capitals where the *parlements* met, such as Rennes in Brittany and Grenoble in Dauphine. In all parts of the country nobles met in unauthorised assemblies to discuss action in support of the *parlements*.

An assembly of the clergy also joined in on the side of the *parlements*, breaking its long tradition of loyalty to the Crown. It condemned the reforms and voted a *don gratuit* of less than a quarter the size requested by the Crown.

Although the opposition was fragmented and dispersed it continued because of the collapse of the government's finances. At the beginning of August 1788 the royal treasury was empty. Brienne agreed, with Louis' reluctant approval, to summon the Estates-General for 1 May 1789. On 16 August 1788, he suspended all payments from the royal treasury, in effect acknowledging that the Crown was bankrupt. The previous year, the then navy minister, the Marquis de Castries, had perceptively told the King, 'As a Frenchman I want the Estates-General, as a minister I am bound to tell you that they might destroy your authority'.

French Crown is effectively bankrupt:  
16 August 1788

Key date



In September 1788 Louis was forced to back down and allow the Paris *parlement* to return. Following the resignations of Brienne and Lamoignon, the King recalled Necker, in the belief that he was the only one who could restore the government's credit and raise new loans. Necker abandoned his predecessor's reform plans and, while indicating that he would try to raise new loans, stated that he would do nothing until the Estates-General had met.

The crisis had shown the limitations of royal power. Although Louis was in effect an Absolute ruler, in reality he was unable to impose his government's reforms on the State. The forces of opposition detected clear signs of weakness in the Crown. The failure to secure reform contributed to a paralysis of the government. In the short term this was very significant, particularly when linked to the economic crisis.

### Key question

How did the economic crisis contribute to the outbreak of the Revolution?

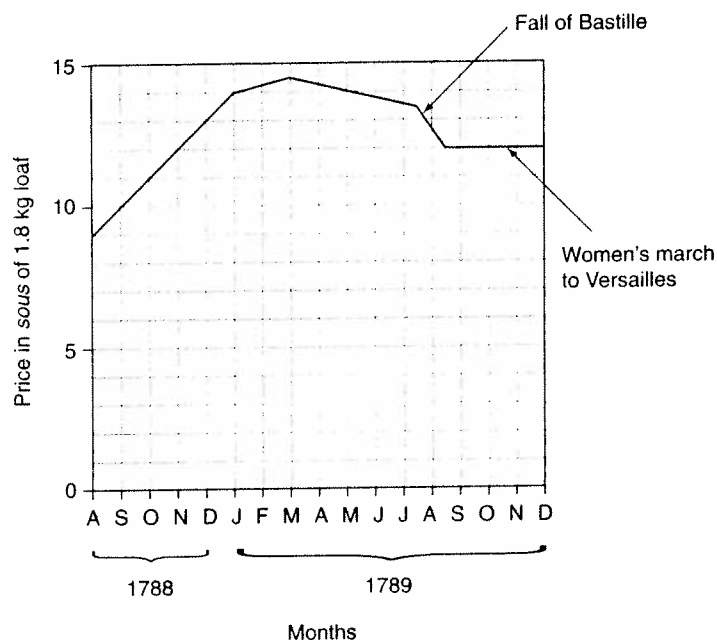
### (c) The economic crisis

In the years immediately preceding the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789 the French economy faced a number of crises. The economy was largely based on agriculture and this sector had grown steadily between the 1730s and 1770s. Good harvests had resulted in food surpluses, which in turn contributed to an increase in the population.

#### Bad harvests

During the 1780s the general agricultural prosperity came suddenly to an end. This was brought about in no small measure by a series of disastrous harvests in 1778–9, 1781–2, 1785–6 and 1787. In 1788 there was a major disaster. There was a very wet spring and freak hailstones in many areas in July resulting in a very poor harvest. This was particularly disastrous for peasants

**Figure 1.3:** Bread prices in Paris, August 1788–December 1789



who produced wine as a cash crop. A bad harvest in a pre-industrial society always led to massive unemployment. The resulting rise in the price of food led to less demand for manufactured goods, at a time when both peasants and urban workers needed employment more than ever to cope with the higher prices. The impact on staple foods such as bread was significant. Over the period 1726 to 1789 wheat prices increased by about 60 per cent. In normal times it is estimated that about half a labourer's daily wage might be spent on bread. During the severe winter of 1788–9 this proportion was increased to 88 per cent.

The picture in other sectors of the economy was equally gloomy. Production and employment in the textile industries, which accounted for half of industrial production, fell by 50 per cent in 1789. The industry had been badly hit by the Eden Treaty of 1786. Textile production was largely carried out in rural cottages by women, and tended to supplement family incomes from agriculture. This further affected a group who were already suffering economic hardship. The market for wine was also very poor since rising bread prices meant that there was less money to spend on this and other goods. Unemployment was rising at the same time as the cost of living and, as production was either stagnant or falling, workers were unable to increase their wages.

The Eden Treaty:  
1786

Allowed imports of English goods, including textiles, at reduced import duties (came into operation in May 1787).

Key date

### Food shortage

Many ordinary people blamed tithe-owners and landowners for making the situation worse. They were accused of hoarding grain and speculating on prices rising during times of shortage, thereby contributing to the lack of food. In many areas there were food riots and disturbances as people attacked grain stores. These were most frequent in the spring and summer of 1789 when grain prices were at their peak, before the new harvest had been collected.

It was believed by many ordinary people in both rural and urban areas that the economic crisis was in part the fault of the nobility. Increasing disturbances against the nobility encouraged many ordinary people to take the first tentative steps towards direct political action. The **politicisation** of the majority of the Third Estate began as a result of the economic crisis. Louis' handling of the political crisis further exacerbated the situation in the eyes of ordinary people.

The deep-rooted long-term problems of the *ancien régime*, considered in the first part of this chapter, came to a head in the years immediately preceding 1789. Short-term causes such as poor harvests and rising bread prices helped to bring this about. The attempts at reform were an acknowledgement that changes were needed; the failure of the process showed the depth of the divisions within French society. When the French monarchy declared itself bankrupt and the Assembly of Notables refused to approve the reforms proposed by the King's ministers, the way was paved for the summoning of the Estates-General. Much was expected from this body by all parties. The next chapter will reveal how few could have anticipated the momentous consequences of the decision to summon it.

### Politicisation

A process when people who were previously unconcerned with politics take an active interest in political issues which affect their daily lives.

Key term

### Summary diagram: Short-term causes of the French Revolution

#### Foreign policy and the American War of Independence

- Government sought revenge against Britain following 1763
- Supporting American rebels against British 1778–83 results in:
  - massive additional debt (1000 million *livres*)
  - awareness of political liberty for USA while no political liberty in France

#### Financial crisis

- Government on verge of bankruptcy
- Seeks new measures to raise taxes

#### The failure of the reform process

- Assembly of Notables refuses to back reform
- Dismissal of Calonne

#### The political crisis 1787–8

- Louis' political weakness
- Revolt of the Aristocracy

#### The economic crisis

- Bad harvests – rising bread prices
- Less consumption – unemployment
- Grain and food riots

## 3 | The Key Debate

A wide variety of historians of sharply contrasting political and social viewpoints and at differing times have contributed to analysing the origins of the French Revolution. One of the main schools is the **Marxist interpretation**. Marxist historians see the Revolution as part of the class struggle prophesised in the mid-nineteenth century by the German-born philosopher and social economist Karl Marx (1818–83). More recently **Revisionist historians** have rejected this view in favour of different interpretations. The central issue, which historians seek to address, is:

Why did the French Revolution occur?

### Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul

The dominant interpretation of the French Revolution for much of the last 100 years has been the Marxist interpretation. This was most clearly expressed by Georges Lefebvre and later by his disciple Albert Soboul. Lefebvre regarded the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution. The commercial and industrial bourgeoisie had been growing in importance in the eighteenth century and had become stronger economically than the nobility. Yet they were kept out of positions of power by the privileged nobility. According to the Marxists a class struggle developed between the rising bourgeoisie and the declining aristocracy. The bourgeoisie won this struggle because the monarchy became bankrupt owing to the cost of the war in America. The French Revolution was, according to Lefebvre, a struggle for equal rights.

### Key terms

#### Marxist interpretations

The interpretation of the Revolution as part of Karl Marx's analysis of history as a series of class-based struggles, resulting in the triumph of the proletariat.

#### Revisionist historians

Historians who reject the Marxist analysis of the French Revolution and provide a revised interpretation.

### Alfred Cobban and François Furet

The Marxist account of the Revolution was generally accepted until the 1960s. It was challenged by a group of 'Revisionist' (anti-Marxist) historians. The first important critic was Alfred Cobban who questioned the validity of the **social interpretation** and also whether the Revolution was led by a rising bourgeoisie. The best known of the Revisionist historians is François Furet. He went beyond merely questioning the economic and social interpretations of the Revolution as a class-based struggle, favoured by the Marxists, to considering the intellectual and cultural background to 1789. According to Furet, the driving force for change was the advanced democratic ideas of the Enlightenment *philosophes* such as Rousseau.

### Social interpretations

The emphasis on changes in society – population trends, social class – as having a significant impact upon the Revolution.

Key term

### J.H. Shennan

J.H. Shennan's analysis, based on much recent research, argues that the most likely cause of the Revolution is that long-term problems and resentments were brought to a head by events immediately preceding 1789. According to Professor Shennan the two most important areas in which deep-seated problems reached a critical point in the 1770s and 1780s were finance and government. Financial problems brought about by involvement in the American War of Independence were compounded by a series of bad harvests, which resulted in steep increases in the price of bread. Behind both of these factors lay the permanent problem posed by the conservative social and political order which prevented the rich land of France developing as it should, and the government constantly starved of income.

### Gwynne Lewis

Gwynne Lewis attempts to synthesise the debate and seeks to reach some kind of post-Revisionist consensus. While Marxist historians stress the social and economic aspects of the origins such as rising prices and unemployment, Revisionists focus on political and cultural issues such as the nature of absolutism and the role of the Church. Lewis' main criticism of the Revisionist historians is the way in which they have tended to down-play the importance of social causes of the Revolution.

### Some key books in the debate

Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1964).

François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

George Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Vintage Books, 1947).

George Lefebvre, *The French Revolution* (Routledge, 2001).

Gwynne Lewis, *The French Revolution. Rethinking the Debate* (Routledge, 1993).

J.H. Shennan, *France before the Revolution* (Methuen, 1983).

Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution 1787–1799* (Unwin, 1989).